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SUBJECT: VERSAILLES CONGRESS APPROVES AMENDMENTS, EU

REFERENDUM NEXT ON THE AGENDA

REF: A. REF A: PARIS 278
1B. REF B: PARIS 1264

¶11. (SBU) SUMMARY: President Chirac is expected to set a date for the referendum on the EU Constitution before the end of this week, following approval of EU-related amendments to the French Constitution at a specially convened Congress in Versailles yesterday, February 28. Chirac's next -- and perhaps more difficult -- challenge will be to keep popular discontent from adversely affecting the referendum on the EU Constitution, expected to be held in May or June. The French public has a history of using referendum votes "to send politicians a message," although polls suggest the proposed EU Constitution would be approved if the referendum were held today. END SUMMARY.

¶12. (U) At yesterday's joint session in Versailles, National Assembly deputies and senators voted to approve the several amendments (ref A) to the French Constitution to make its provisions consistent with those of the proposed EU Constitution. The amendments passed by a 730-66 vote margin, with 96 abstentions. Only the Communists voted against the amendments, and the abstentionists were mostly Socialists who oppose the EU Constitution but preferred not to vote against their party's pro-EU position. President Chirac will now consult with political party leaders, before announcing later this week the date for the referendum. The referendum is expected to be held sometime between mid-May and early June. French lawmakers also approved yesterday the so-called Environment Charter, a pet project of President Chirac, which enshrines environmental rights in the French constitution. The Charter passed by a 531 to 23 margin, with 111 abstentions coming largely from the Socialists.

¶13. (U) A February 25-26 poll sponsored by the center-left daily "Liberation," revealed relatively strong support for the EU Constitution, with 60 percent of those polled saying they planned to vote in favor of the constitution. Forty percent were opposed. Earlier in February, the same poll showed 61 percent supported the constitution, but this was down from a 69 percent peak in October of last year. Another poll, conducted for the daily newspaper "Le Parisien" showed similar results, with 63 percent of those polled approving the EU Constitution, up from 60 percent in the last poll. Observers caution that the 1992 Maastricht Treaty enjoyed roughly the same level of support early in the campaign, only to be passed by a narrow 51-49 percent margin on referendum day. The "Parisien" poll also revealed that 59 percent of voters will likely not participate on referendum day, up five points from the prior poll.

¶14. (SBU) COMMENT: The French public has a history of using referendum votes as a means of expressing their discontent with the government. The public continues to be preoccupied by the stubbornly high unemployment rate; figures released last week showed that unemployment in January reached the psychologically important 10 percent level. The Gaymard affair (reftel B) -- with its housing extravagances at public expense and lies about personal wealth -- has reinforced the long-standing public perception that France's governing elite accords itself privileges unthinkable for ordinary people. Public sector unions, for their part, are unhappy about on going reforms of the pension, health care and education systems. They also oppose government plans to loosen 35 hour work-week rules for private sector employees, and to partially privatize the utility giants EDF and GDF, as well as the nuclear conglomerate Areva. France's pro-EU politicians fear that low overall voter turn-out on referendum day could give the "sanction voters" and anti-EU forces just enough of an edge to carry the day -- and toss an unexpected wrench in the works of EU integration. END COMMENT.
Leach